

**The gendered God in the Setswana Bible
and the captivity of Modimo:
Moffat and the translating of the Bible into Setswana**

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Abstract

The historiography of Christianity among the Batswana is incomplete without the missionary, Robert Moffat. This is because he is regarded as one of the pioneers of missionary activity in South Africa, particularly among the Batswana. He was the first missionary to translate the Bible into Setswana, first the New Testament in 1840, and finally, translating both the Old and New Testaments in 1857. Batswana intellectuals referred to the Bible as the English-Tswana Bible. It is in this translated Bible that I would argue that the Christian gendered God replaces the gender-neutral Modimo wa Batswana. Furthermore, the 1857 Bible forms the basis for later translation of the Bible into other versions, such as the 1908 Setswana Bible by AJ Wookey. The translation process, I would argue, was an attempt by the translators to shackle Tswana Modimo and to demonise Badimo. The attitude, worldview and presuppositions of Moffat cannot be separated from the written translated text, the results of which were the subsequent versions from Wookey and Cole. Such an attitude is illustrated in the following manner:

These missionaries went to the country of the Bechuanas, in South Africa. It was a hot and thirsty country, and the people were dark-looking, and wild, and filthy, and savage.¹

¹ Robert Moffat, *Mr Moffat and the Bechuanas of South Africa*, (New York: Carlton & Porter), 1842:8.

Itumeleng Daniel Mothoagae

It is the intention of this article to argue that the early stages of Christianity among the Batswana were based on the assumption that they had no idea of God (Modimo). The missionary activity was a total replacement of what they understood Modimo to be. Modimo was perceived to be an un-saving, lacking the characteristics of a Christian (gendered) God. The article will focus on the writings of Robert Moffat and Mahoko a Bechuana². I will further argue that in his attempt of translating the Bible into Setswana Moffat can be elucidated by considering literal translation theory.³ According to the translation theory the translator(s) should meet three important requirements; namely, the source language, the target language, and the subject matter. The decoloniality theory postulates the dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geo-political hierarchies. Both these theories will be used as the theoretical framework. Conclusions and challenges will be suggested.

Introduction

In many African cultures, for example, the name and concept of the deity are often female. It is also women who are responsible for the intervention between people and the deity. This concept was foreign to early missionary Bible translators, and most translations changed the word of God to adapt it to the Western, male God name. These kinds of translations, now accepted by churches, have helped to reverse the status of women in religious spheres, both in the church and in local cultures.⁴

The legacy of Christianity among the Batswana finds its climax with the first Setswana Bible translated by missionary Robert Moffat in 1857. Though it was a milestone for him to translate the Bible into Setswana, it is no doubt

² The name Bechuana was used by the travellers, missionaries and explorers in contrast to how Batswana referred to themselves.

³ According to Pérez Vallejo, one of the earliest attempts to establish a set of major rules or principles to be referred to in literary translation was made by French translator and humanist Étienne Dolet: in 1540 he formulated the following fundamental principles of translation ("La Manière de Bien Traduire d'une Langue en Aultre"), usually regarded as providing rules of thumb for the practicing translator. <http://www.translationdirectory.com/article414.htm>.

⁴ Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, *Translation*, in Russell and Clarkson 1996:303.

that in his memoirs, journals and letters⁵, and his books⁶, we find out what he really thought of Tswana customs and religion. It can be argued that in the domestication of Modimo⁷, Moffat began with the earliest publication of the Gospel of Luke into the Setlhaping dialect⁸ in 1830, continued with the finalisation of the New Testament in 1840, and was dogmatised in the completion of the Old Testament in 1857. I would argue that the publications of missionaries – such as Read (1816), Campbell (1822), John Philip (1828), Hamilton, Henry Helm (1819), and Evans who arrived prior to Robert Moffat – about the Batswana, as well as Moffat's presuppositions, influenced the process of domestication of Modimo.⁹

The 1857 the English-Tswana Bible domesticated the concept of Modimo in order to suit the interests of the missionaries, particularly the translator himself. Consequently, even the 1908 Setswana Bible by AJ Wookey and the subsequent one of 1952 by DT Cole continued to shackle Modimo and to demonise Badimo.

In this article I will argue that the legacy of Christianity in South Africa is to be understood from the perspective of: Why did the missionaries come to South Africa? In whose interest was it? Who and how was the Bible translated? I maintain that Robert Moffat, when he was translating the Bible

⁵ The letters that I refer to are those of Robert and Mary Moffat. These letters were written to family members, of both Robert and Mary. Other letters were addressed to the Directors of the London Missionary Society. They were compiled by their son John S. Moffat, in his book: *The lives of Robert and Mary Moffat* 1885.

⁶ Missionary labours and scenes in Southern Africa, rivers of water in a dry place (1892), and books such as *Adventures of missionary; or rivers of water in a dry place: Being an account of the introduction of the Gospel of Jesus into South Africa, Mr Moffat's missionary travels and labors* (1969)

⁷ Throughout the article I will keep on referring to Modimo, rather than God. This is because in the Christian sense God is gendered (male). Thus speaking of Modimo as God is problematic considering that in Setswana Modimo is gender neutral. These distinctions are intentionally made so as to indicate the differences in the conceptualisation of Modimo and God.

⁸ Setlhaping is one of the dialects found among the Batswana.

⁹ In his book *Printing for Africa. The story of Robert Moffat and the Kuruman press* (1987), Bradlow refers to the letter written by Evans to the London Missionary Society (LMS). He argues that the LMS was convinced of the validity of Evans' argument. Even though earlier on, Dr. J. van der Kemp had compiled a spelling list and an elementary catechism in a Khoi dialect of the Eastern Cape (1802), and the 1823 publication of *Systematic Vocabulary of the Kaffrarian Language at Lovedale* by John Bennie. Read and Hamilton stayed behind with the Batlaping and continued in their attempt to rewrite the "rude speech into a proper form". In 1819 missionary Henry Helm published the first edition of an elementary spelling book in the Bechuana language at Griquastad, compiled by the "brethren at Lattakoo" the first book in Setswana! This spelling book was not widely used and no copies have remained. A year later Read wrote to Campbell and expressed that even though they had been collecting many Setswana words and expanding their knowledge of the Setswana vocabulary, he considered himself to be "unfit" to translate the Bible into Setswana (Bradlow 1987:9-10).

Itumeleng Daniel Mothoagae

into Setswana, used the translation theory.¹⁰ In the context of the 1857 Setswana Bible, I would argue that we see written versus oral. This is because there were two processes at the same time namely, translating and interpreting. Thus the definition of translation by Nida and Taber may best accommodate interpreting as the reproduction of “the closest natural equivalent” of the Source Language message in the Target Language “serves as a common ground or interface of translating and interpreting”; the former is not mainly or exclusively concerned with the accurate, semantic transference. The translated text should, at least ideally and theoretically, be as semantically accurate, grammatically correct, stylistically effective and textually coherent as the source text, states As-Safi.¹¹ Pérez Vallejo defines the translation theory in the following manner:

Conventionally, it is suggested that in order to perform their job successfully, translators should meet three important requirements; they should be familiar with: the source language, the target language, the subject matter...¹²

These basic requirements are not evident in both the 1840 New Testament and the 1857 Old Testament English-Tswana Bible where *Badimo* are demonised and *Modimo wa Batswana* (*Modimo* of Batswana) shackled.¹³ Letters to Mahoko a Becwana 1883-1896¹⁴ point to the various debates that took place between the Batswana and the missionaries as well as the arrogance of the missionaries regarding what is to be believed, how Setswana is to be

¹⁰ I follow Nida and Taber definition of translation; this is because their definition is not confined to the mere transference of meaning. They postulate translation consists of reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style (1969:12).

¹¹ Avdul Baki M As-Safi, *Translation Theories, Strategies and Basic Theoretical Issues*, (2011), 5.

¹² Juan Daniel Pérez Vallejo, “Translation Theory” <http://www.translationdirectory.com/article414.htm> accessed 10 September 2014

¹³ By shackling of *Modimo* I am referring to identity that *Modimo* takes in the Bible rather than maintaining the neutral-gender what is found in the oral expression of *Modimo*.

¹⁴ *Mahoko a Becwana* (News/words of Batswana), a Setswana-language newspaper; published by missionaries of the London Missionary Society at Kuruman between the periods of 1883-1896. The majority of the writers were members of congregations in what are today South Africa’s Northern Cape Province and Northwest Province, but many also wrote from as far away as the Transvaal, Orange Free State and the Bechuanaland Protectorate. Most of the writings were letters to the editor, but their intended audience was primarily other Batswana readers of the newspaper. They wrote on a wide range of topics of concern to literate, mission-educated Batswana at that time, including mission work, theology, standardisation of written Setswana, cultural change and the European colonisation. Their letters were also often written in response to other letters or missionary articles, producing lively debates on a number of controversial issues. These writings offer a rare and revealing glimpse of the conversations that took place among literate Africans during a crucial period in the formation of modern South Africa and Botswana.

written. It is the intention of the article to challenge black church historians, theologians and biblical scholars to excavate these issues and to free Modimo wa Batswana and to study the responses of the Batswana independent of the evangelisation.

The decoloniality theory can be defined as the dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geo-political hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern-colonial world.¹⁵

The arrival of the missionaries in Kuruman: whose interest?

The arrival of the missionary at the Cape of Good Hope was to serve a certain clientele. The intention was to enable the expatriates to cope and adapt to the new geographical environment by providing necessary pastoral care and also to provide the settler community with familiar symbols, rituals and values. One can say that the church, as De Gruchy rightly points out, “became a cultural link with the ‘old country’”.¹⁶

The missionaries, while they were serving their constituency, saw a “need” to “evangelise” and “civilise” the so-called “heathen” and “savage” black people. It is within this context that I locate the agricultural metaphors used by Moffat in his description of the African land and its people. In the missionaries’ eyes the African landscape to the missionaries presented itself as a virgin devoid of society and history waiting to be watered and tilled by evangelical effort.¹⁷ The New Testament texts were used to portray the South African land and Africa as a whole as the empty stage on which to enact a “Promethean” myth. Whatever had not been surveyed by the European eye had not been invested with light. Furthermore, the introduction of Christianity among the Batswana needs to be situated within these discourses. In an article (2014) I published I argue that:

The European missionaries such as Robert Moffat and AJ Wookey translated the Bible with the intention of subverting the Tswana tradition and spirituality ...¹⁸

¹⁵ Itumeleng D Mothoagae, “An Exercise of Power as Epistemic Racism and Privilege: The Subversion of Tswana Identity”, *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 16:1-2, (2014), 13.

¹⁶ John W de Gruchy, “Settler Christianity”, in *Living Faiths in South Africa*, ed. Martin Prozesky and John de Gruchy (Cape Town: Clyson Printers, 1995), 31-32.

¹⁷ Jean and John Comaroff, *Through the Looking-glass: Colonial Encounters of the First Kind*, *Journal of Historical Sociology* Vol. 1 No. 1, 1988:6

¹⁸ Itumeleng D Mothoagae, *An Exercise of Power as Epistemic Racism and Privilege: The Subversion of Tswana Identity*, *Souls Critical Insight into Black Spirituality* 2014:1-18

Itumeleng Daniel Mothoagae

Thus the writings of the missionaries have to be studied precisely with a critical eye, because their point of departure was a negative perception of the Batswana, their culture, customs, religion and knowledge. This includes the 1857 and the 1908 Tswana-English Bible. Dube concurs with this view in her reflections on her experience of Bible reading with Batswana women in Botswana, while doing field work. She states:

But here a minefield awaited me. I had trodden on dangerous and deadly ground. I found out that where the Canaanite woman said, 'My daughter is severely possessed by demons', in Mt. 15.22, it was translated as *orwadiake o chwenwa thatake Badimo*. That is, 'my daughter is severely possessed by the High Ones or Ancestors'. I was stunned. The word *Badimo* literally means the 'High Ones' or 'Ancestral Spirits' in Setswana cultures. *Badimo* are sacred personalities who are mediators between God and the living in Setswana cultures ...¹⁹

The identification of *Badimo*²⁰ with demons points to a lack of knowledge. As a result the translation of Mt.15:22 evil spirits as *Badimo* (ancestors) shows how those who have converted to Christianity are no longer the children of darkness, but of the light. It is for this reason that Dube points to the minefield that awaited her.²¹

This ground has been made treacherous by the translation that is based on someone who knew nothing of the oral history and tradition of those he was "serving". Such a mentality could be sketched from the memoirs, journals and letters of the missionaries themselves. It is in these writings that one can get a glimpse of their thoughts, superstitions, religious worldviews, epistemological privilege, and the concept of Modimo in terms of how they perceive the religious worldview of the Batswana. For the sake of the article I will discuss in detail Robert Moffat, precisely because he was the first missionary to translate the Bible into Setswana, and will briefly refer to the 1908 Setswana Bible – a "revision" done by Wookey as well as the 1952 "revision" by Cole.

¹⁹ Musa Dube, Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb: Translating Badimo Into 'Demons' in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8.28-34; 15.22; 10.8), *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 1999 21:33, 38-39.

²⁰ This is illustrated in the 1908 Setswana Bible translated by AJ Wookey. In the Setswana Christian Bible we see the colonised, gendered and exiled Modimo. For example in Matt. 10:8 Wookey translates the text in the following manner: *kgoromeletsan badimo ntle*, meaning Cast out Badimo (Batswana ancestors).

²¹ Musa Dube, Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb: Translating Badimo Into 'Demons' in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8.28-34; 15.22; 10.8), *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 1999 21:33, 38-39.

Moffat narration of the encounter between the missionaries and Batswana

The perceptions that the Batswana had no idea of God could be traced from the missionary's description of the Batswana as creatures rather than people. This in turn leads to how Christianity becomes a mode of attempting to "civilise", "convert", and distinguish between the "saved" and the "unsaved", the saving God and the "unsaving Modimo". It is for this reason that Moffat makes the following assertion regarding the encounter with the Batswana:

Now I will tell you what kind of people the Bechuanas were, and a few of the things which missionaries had to put up with. And, first, you cannot think how dirty they were ... They liked better to smear themselves with grease and ochre. Sometimes these poor dirty creatures would crowd into Mr Moffat's house while he was away, and Mrs Moffat did not dare to ask them to go, or they might have stoned her in their rage. They would dirty everything they touched, and make the house hardly bearable.²²

The assumption that the Batswana as a people were filthy as is indicated in the above citation points to why Moffat was driven with the zeal of wanting to convert the Batswana. Christianity becomes a vehicle of imperialism and the Western norm is used to measure and distinguish between the "heathen" and a "Christian"; this can be referred to as the "Othering". Furthermore, those who they are supposedly serving seem to qualify to be called and referred to not as people, but as the "Other". The notion of creature further points to the assumption that the Batswana had no soul, hence they are filthy, wild, savage and animal-like. All of these are characteristics of an animal. Moffat in his book, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa*, makes a very disturbing assertion regarding the Batswana by stating that:

Satan is obviously the author of the polytheism of other nations; he has employed his agency, with fatal success, in erasing every vestige of religious impression from the minds of the Bechaunas, Hottentots, Bushmen; leaving them without a single ray to guide them from the dark and dread futurity, or a single link to unite them with the skies.²³

²² *Ibid.*, 11.

²³ Robert Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa*, (London: J Snow), 1842:244.

The contention that Satan is the author of polytheism implies that there is clearly no indication of the knowledge of God. In other words, the attributions such as filthy, savage, creature, wild and dark-looking are the characteristics of Satan. I would argue that such an assumption about people will influence his own presupposition about Modimo, Badimo in his translation of the Bible into a local dialect. Yet at the same time as I will show in the next section that Moffat himself, in the very book, refers to the concept of Morimo meaning Modimo in negative terms.

Moffat's perceptions about the concept of Modimo among the Batswana

But all this ill-usage did not give the missionaries half so much pain as it did to hear these poor savages make a mock of the solemn truths they taught. The Bechuanas were atheists. They had no idols like other nations; no ideas of the soul, of heaven, or of hell; no notion of any god at all; no word in their language for God ...²⁴

The above citation suggests that the Batswana as a people had no sense of the Divine; as a result one can conclude they knew nothing about right and wrong. Furthermore, because they are not similar to other so-called heathens in the East, precisely because they had no temples, idols or altars, it can be concluded that their idea of God is minimal or not there at all. An interesting thing about Moffat and other missionaries – such as Campbell, Casalis, Livingstone, Read, Evans, Wookey and Hamilton – is that they approached the Batswana from a Western epistemological abstract understanding of God. As a result they failed to see the rich concepts that the Batswana had in their vocabulary. Perhaps that is one of the reasons that they saw the language of the Batswana as unintelligent. As a result, in 1826, Robert Moffat compiled the *Bechuana Spelling Book*. The content of the book is very interesting as it contains consonants and vowels that are English and the explanations are translated from Setswana to English. In other words, he does a literal translation from “Tswana” to English. He is not ashamed to have miss-spelled or pronounced the words differently from the people who speak the language. As a missionary Moffat was never trained as a linguist.²⁵ Moffat was very slow in learning the language; as a result he used Dutch to preach. Perhaps I could ask the question: Were people familiar with Dutch, or did he work on the assumption that since the settlers in the Cape and the Griquas spoke Dutch, therefore, all people spoke Dutch? Instead he uses interpreters; it is the very interpreters that he will later refer to as ignorant in his book,

²⁴ Robert Moffat, *Mr Moffat and the Bechuanas of South Africa*, (New York: Carlton & Porter), 1842:14-15.

²⁵ CM Doke, *Scripture Translation into Bantu Languages*, *African Studies* 17:2, 1958:85.

The gendered God in the Setswana Bible and the captivity of Modimo: ...

Missionary labours and scenes in Southern Africa (1842). He refers to his translators in the following manner:

The natives will smile, and make allowances for the blundering speeches of the missionary and though some may convey the very opposite meaning to that which he intends...²⁶

It is interesting that Moffat does not refer to his translators (interpreters) by their names, while Burchell, in his book *Travels into the interior of Southern Africa Vol. II 1728-1863*, refers to his interpreter by name – *Michunka*. However, he too, has little regard for his translators, referring to them as people who lack the ability to sustain mental exertion. But at least he does recognise them by referring to them by their names. He concludes that it is absurd for them to seek in their language that which was not to be found in their ideas – higher operations of intellectual power which, perhaps, belong only to civilised society and cultivated minds.²⁷ What Burchell is saying about Batswanas is not different from Moffat's own assertion. Yet, they overlook the cultural differences, and oral tradition. In this case it can be said that it is written versus oral. One of the indicators regarding the translators is that they spoke Dutch, Hottentot and Setswana. Thus, the traveller, including the missionaries, relied immensely on the help of the translator. Yet, in eyes of the travellers and the missionaries, the very translators are unintelligent. It is important to note, as Doke asserts, that Moffat realised his incompetency and went to learn Setswana on his own for two months among the Batswana.²⁸ Not knowing the language could explain the failure in Moffat in recognising the intelligence in Setswana. Furthermore, by teaching himself Setswana suggests that he did not trust the owners of the language. thus situating himself as an authority and a person of knowledge.

Both Burchell and Moffat assess the religious view of the Batswana from their own understanding of what makes a religion a religion and how it is identified. Yet, at the same time, there cannot be a singular comprehension of a worldview. Perhaps their attitude was guided by the philosophy of Hegel regarding African people in the following manner:

²⁶ Robert Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (London: J Snow, 1842), 294.

²⁷ William J Burchell, *Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa Vol. II 1728?-1863*, (London: Paternoster-Row), 1824:295. See also the work of Lichtenstein, Hinrich. "The Foundation of Cape and about the Bechuanas." in *Heinrich Lichtenstein: Foundation of the Cape and the Bechuanas*, by O Spohr. n.d. Lichtenstein, Hinrich. "Travels in Southern Africa 1815." in *Travels in Southern Africa*, by A Plumtre, 377. (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society), 1930.

²⁸ CM Doke, *Scripture Translation into Bantu Languages*, *African Studies* 17:2, 1958:85.

Itumeleng Daniel Mothoagae

Africa is in general a closed land, and it maintains this fundamental character. It is characteristic of the blacks that their consciousness has not yet even arrived at the intuition of any objectivity, as for example, of God or the law, in which humanity relates to the world and intuits its essence. He [the black person] is a human being in the rough.²⁹

Such an attitude is characterised by the assumption that anything from Europe, including Christianity, is of the highest, while other religious experiences are of a lower order. It is not surprising that even Moffat himself refers to the Batswana as not having a religion; rather, they have beliefs and one of their beliefs is witchcraft. As a result they were very cruel to supposed bewitchers.³⁰ I would like to argue that it is such attitudes and perceptions that would influence immensely his gendering of Modimo as a male. This is precisely because, how are people who have no understanding, let alone knowledge of Modimo, able to shed some light on the process of translating the Bible into their language? It is at this point that I would like to discuss his supposition about the concept of Modimo among the Batswana.

Robert Moffat's supposition on the concept of Modimo

Robert Moffat in his book, *Missionary labours and scenes in Southern Africa* (1842), refers to the observation of Sparrman regarding the African natives. According to Sparrman, among the Bechuana tribes there is a name adopted by the missionaries which is Morimo. Sparrman argues that its derivation at once determines its meaning in the following manner:

Mo is a personal prefix, and rimo is from gorimo 'above'. From the same root legorimo, 'heaven', and its plural magorimo, are derived. The genius of the Sechuana language warrants us to expect a correspondence between the name and the thing designated; but in this instance the order is reversed.³¹

From the citation above, there is clearly knowledge of Modimo. Furthermore, the prefix Mo is reserved for people, not animals and things. Hence, there is motho (person) batho (people). One can say Mo represents the apex of creation. It is therefore proper to begin with a prefix Mo when referring to

²⁹ Itumeleng D Mothoagae, An Exercise of Power as Epistemic Racism and Privilege: The Subversion of Tswana Identity, *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 16:1-2, 12.

³⁰ ML Wilder, *Missionary Annals (A series) Memoir of Robert Moffat, missionary to South Africa 1817-1870*, (Chicago: Fleming H Revell Company), 1887:82-83.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 261.

The gendered God in the Setswana Bible and the captivity of Modimo: ...

Modimo. This is what Sparrman ascertained when he refers to the use of singular and plural in the language of the Batswana. Sparrman maintains the following:

According to one rule of forming the plural of personal nouns beginning with *mo*, *Barimo* would only be the plural of *Morimo*, as *Monona*, 'a man', *Banona*, 'men'. But the word is never used in this form, nor did it convey to the Bechuana mind in the idea of a person or persons.³²

The argument by Sparrman points to a distinct affirmation that among the Batswana the concept of Modimo was different from the idea of *Badimo*. However, one can see that the adoption of these two concepts by Moffat and subsequently by Wookey was to first remove the traditional understanding of Modimo, so as to give Modimo a different "identity" from that of the people. As a result Modimo is constructed as Triune God, who revealed the God-self to humanity as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the God of Israel, while at the same time *Badimo* then represented the opposite of the divine. Thus those who convert move from darkness to light; in this case *Badimo* lose their social status as mediators and the sustainers of the community. Venerating them is like entering into the dangerous territory of Satan. It is important to understand Moffat's suppositions regarding the religion of the Batswana. This is because, according to him, he saw their religion as a hindrance to the spreading of the Gospel and civilisation. In the introduction of his book, (1951) *Apprenticeship at Kuruman being the journals and letters of Robert and Mary Moffat 1820-1828*, Isaac Schapera outlines Moffat's attitude towards the Batswana religion in the following manner:

Apart from their use of magic, the BaTswana had a well-developed system of religion. The dominant cult was the worship of ancestral spirit (*Badimo*). Each family was held to be under the supernatural guidance and protection of its deceased ancestors in the male line, to whom sacrifices were offered and prayers said on all occasions of domestic importance... The people also believed in a high God, named *Modimo*, who was regarded as the creator of all things and the moulder of destiny. He was vaguely associated with the phenomena of the weather, and punished innovations, or departure from established usage, by sending wind, hail or

³² *Ibid.*, 261

Itumeleng Daniel Mothoagae

heat, and withdrawing the rain; and death, if not attributable to sorcery, was spoken of as 'an act of God'.³³

One thing that is worth highlighting in the above citation is the use of the "male" term, which in essence refers to the male gender when referring to Modimo in terms of Setswana.³⁴ It is in this quotation that I would argue that the gendering of Modimo is evident. Furthermore, it is in the very citation that I maintain, not only does he give Modimo a gender, but he is also shackling Modimo, thus losing the meaning of the very concept. He does not even refer to the question of whether, for the Batswana, Modimo has a gender or not. In the case of Christianity the Triune God is distinguished in terms of roles and gender. We have God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. His failure to recognise the genderless and the neutrality of Modimo makes him fail to understand the very concept of Modimo among the people he is supposedly serving.

It is at this point that I would like to discuss the Batswana concept of Modimo. This will then be followed by the section on the gendered God in the Setswana bible: a Christian legacy.

The Batswana concept of Modimo

In order to comprehend the concept of Modimo among the Batswana it is imperative to unpack the concept itself. This is because, the concept of Modimo sheds light on what the people believed in prior to the arrival of Christianity. J Tom Brown, a member of the London Missionary Society who wrote the English-Setswana Dictionary (1923), was puzzled by the Setswana verb *dima*. In his astonishment he consulted an old Motswana man proficient in the traditions of his people. The old man demonstrated *go dima* to him by pouring a drop of ink on blotting paper. The ink penetrated, permeated, percolated, and spread, and the old man explained "You see, that is *go dima*; and that is what Modimo does."³⁵ According to Setiloane, Tom Brown made the following entry in his dictionary:

dima, v.pft *dimile*: the true original meaning of the word is very obscure. Some say it is the verb from which *Modimo* comes or a verb formed from *Modimo*. It carries the force of a searching, penetrating insight into men and things (a kind of X-

³³ Isaac Schapera, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman. being the journals and letters of Robert and Mary Moffat 1820-1828*, (London: Chatto & Windus), 1951:xxi

³⁴ The word Setswana refers to the language and culture of Batswana. Motswana refers to a person who comes from any of the tribes of Batswana, while Batswana is a plural of Motswana.

³⁵ Wilfred C. Smith. *Towards a World Theology*. (London: Macmillan), 1981:51.

ray!). It may also mean to excel: *Moea o o dimang*; an excellent and searching spirit in understanding – to create.³⁶

Furthermore, the notion of Modimo cannot be separated from the idea of *Badimo*. It is for this reason that Setiloane, in his book *The image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, outlines the 16 images of Modimo among the Sotho-Tswana. For the sake of this article I will focus on the seven concepts of Modimo as discussed in his book. Firstly, he argues that, Modimo is One; consequently, Modimo has no plural. There is no being whom they could begin to compare with IT.³⁷ Nor would it occur to them that IT was any other than THAT called, in neighbouring societies, by other names. Secondly, Modimo is supreme; this is expressed in the praises such as:

- (i) Hlaa-Hlaa Macholo, a phrase which is difficult to translate but means roughly, “whose origin is in antiquity”, “ancient days”. (ii) Somewhat similar in meaning is the praise already quoted, ‘MODIMO wa borara’ (of my forefathers). Hence, the constant reference to them for better knowledge about. (iii) ‘Ea Qhoeng tse Dithaba’ (whose abode is on the highest peaks of the mountains). (iv) ‘Mong’a Tsohle’ (owner or Master of all), ‘Mong’a rona’ (our owner).

Thirdly, Modimo is invisible, intangible. Setiloane maintains that hence, Sotho-Tswana speaks of Modimo *gaOitsiwe* meaning (unknown). The Supreme Being has never been seen, he is remote, inscrutable. Therefore, IT manifests ITself in the physical phenomena, namely lightning and thunder. This Setiloane maintains they are no more than manifestations and they are not Modimo. Furthermore, there is no suggestion that, traditionally IT was conceived as even so tangible as wind. But not directly sensed. This assertion by Setiloane puts into question the very notion of God in the Christian sense. In other words, in the Christian formulation of God, he can be sensed, hence the concept God is the Spirit. Fourthly, Modimo is ‘Motlhodi’ (source or root). The idea of Modimo as Motlhodi suggests that it is from IT that everything is derived from. He further maintains that the missionaries such as Casalis, Moffat and Willoughby affirm that the Sotho-Tswana could not imagine a time when things were not. Fifthly, Modimo, is “Montshi” (one who enables or helps to come out, enabler, midwife), in his explanation of the concept Setiloane refers to the mythological story about how the Sotho-Tswana people came to being. He maintains, as Willoughby rightly points

³⁶ Gabriel Setiloane, *The Image of God amongst the Sotho-Tswana*. 1976:25.

³⁷ The IT here according to Setiloane is to emphasize the gender neutrality of Modimo.

Itumeleng Daniel Mothoagae

out, that the story is not a creation narrative; rather, “Montshi” falls within a different category. Thus man and animals already existed in the bowels of the earth and Modimo enabled them to emerge onto its surface. Sixthly, Modimo is “Mme” (mother); here the idea of Modimo derives its meaning from the quality of motherhood expressed in the tenderness of the mother as well as the experience of Modimo. Lastly, Modimo is “Lesedi” (light). According to Setiloane the attribute of Modimo as light occurs very late in the literature. He contends that he knows of no specific connection between Modimo and letsatsi (sun) and assumes that “light” could be of Christian influence.³⁸ I will now discuss the legacy of Christianity and the gendered Modimo in the 1857 Setswana Bible.

The gendering of Modimo in the 1857 Tswana Bible

The legacy of Christianity is multifaceted in that there are good things as well as bad things that Christianity brought to the Batswana. It is in these letters that we get a glimpse of the debates regarding the standardisation of written Setswana, mission work, and cultural change. Mojola in his article, *Bible Translation* (2000), raises the following:

How do you translate the God of the Bible in terms of the “god” or “gods” of another culture? How do you change the categories and concepts of biblical religion to terms understood by those of native traditional religions ...?³⁹

Moffat maintains that the Batswana had no idea of the Divine and found no names of the Divine among Setswana language, yet he uses the concept of Modimo in his biblical translations. However, African scholarship and theologians have challenged the perceptions towards Africa. It can be argued that there has been minimal change in the Bible, particularly on the gendering of Modimo in the translated Setswana Bible.⁴⁰

Ntloedibe-Kuswani maintains that in attempting to define what we mean by Allah of Islam, Brahman of Hinduism, Modimo of the Batswana, Ngai of the Kikuyu, Nyasayi of the Luo, Mwari of the Shona, God of Christianity and YHWH of Judaism, we understand the various cultures’ portraits of the Divine through the dominant form of the Divine – in this case the biblical God. There is a trap that Moffat in his translation fell into, thus

³⁸ Gabriel Setiloane *The image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, (Netherlands) 1975:79-80.

³⁹ Aloo Osotsi Mojola, Bible Translation in *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, ed. Virginia Fabella and R.S. girhatajah. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books), 2000:30.

⁴⁰ Gomang Seratwa. Ntloedibe-Kuswani, Translating the Divine: The case of Modimo in the Setswana Bible, in *Other Ways of reading African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W Dube. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature), 2001:79.

defining Modimo wa Batswana within the confines of the God of Christianity. He further argues such an incarceration was the hijacking, Christianising, Westernising and gendering of African concepts of the Divine and the spiritual spaces were informed by the colonial ideology that believed in the superiority of the Christian religion over the local religions. As a result the Christian God was held as the only saving God in the world while the Setswana religion and other religions were seen as the *preparatio evangelica*. He further contends that one cannot therefore conclude that this colonial subjugation ended with colonial times.⁴¹

The study of the proper principle of translation is termed translation theory. This theory is based on a solid foundation of understanding how languages work, recognises that different languages encode meaning in differing forms, yet guides translators to find appropriate ways of preserving meaning while using the most appropriate forms of each language. The translation theory includes principles for translating figurative language, dealing with verbal mismatches, rhetorical questions, inclusion of cohesion markers, and many other topics crucial to good translation. Thus, according to Kanyoro, the translation theory can be defined as “translation is a communication process that moves the message or meaning from source language to the receptor language” (Kanyoro 1996:303). In other words, the source text is given and cannot be changed. In this instance, the Bible that Robert Moffat used is the source text (King James), while the languages and cultures into which he translated the Bible are “receptor languages” that must and can be changed to make space for the Bible.⁴² I will argue that the earliest written understanding of Modimo in Setswana gives us a gender neutrality of Modimo.

Decoloniality as a theory enables us to identify key problems with the translation of Modimo wa Batswana into a male gender. Firstly, it is the power relation between the translator and the audience. Secondly, the trans-

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴² An example can be drawn from the 1908 Setswana Bible by Wookey. Both Hebrew Setswana Testament and Setswana Christian Testament illustrate how the translated Modimo now functions, how Modimo is heard by Batswana and how Modimo is exiled from Batswana and their culture to function apart from and even against them. Genesis (1-2) 1:26-27 is such an example, Modimo creates Adam then Eve from his rib. Adam is likened to God; here it associates male gender rather than the female gender with God's image. In the context of a Setswana reader Modimo is distance both in human forms and from gender-exclusive representations. Thus for Setswana both biblical creation stories are problematic. Throughout the Setswana Hebrew Testament Modimo is connected with the male line, thus excluding the women. While in Setswana Christian Testament Modimo sends his Son here again the male figure comes up again. The exiling of Modimo is demonstrated in Modimo not belonging to Batswana but to the Israelites (cf. Gomang Seratwa. Ntloedibe-Kuswani, *Translating the Divine: The case of Modimo in the Setswana Bible*, in *Other Ways of reading African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W Dube. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature), 2001.

lator uses the source text (Bible) to conceptualise knowledge and to foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geo-political hierarchies by Christianising, Westernising, confining the concept of Modimo into the God of Christianity, as well as demonising Badimo in order to construct a dichotomy between Setswana custom (religion) and Christian religion. Thirdly, it is in the finalisation of the two volumes (New and Old Testaments) that the coloniality of being, power, and knowledge will have an impact on the lived experience as well as language. The debates in Mahoko a Batswana point to this effect because they range from the debates on the standardisation of written Setswana, mission work, cultural change and government.

It is for this reason that Ntloedibe-Kuswani states that Modimo is not only the deity, but also all that pertains to the spirit world; therefore, one can say Modimo can neither be personified nor gendered. Moffat, as I have shown previously in his writings of Setswana, made the concept Modimo to mean man. What he failed to see was that there is much more to Modimo than what he thought. Furthermore, Ntloedibe-Kuswani asserts that the expression in Setswana speaks of Modimo as: *Modimo ke selo se se boitshegang*, which means Modimo, is “something mysterious or awesome”. What we can deduce is that first, Modimo is neither a being nor a person. Secondly, “Something” is “mysterious” and probably too big to be held incarcerated in one place, book, or tradition or to be comprehended by human beings.⁴⁵

Based on Ntloedibe-Kuswani’s argument, I would therefore argue that Modimo as “Something Mysterious” can manifest itself in ways that are gender-inclusive, at different places and times. “Something” is a resistance to take human form and a particular gender, in this case the male form. The Setswana concept of Modimo illustrates that Modimo can inhabit all spaces, in whatever form. It is for this reason that for the Batswana, the whole environment and other forms of life are considered sacred, precisely because Modimo inhabits them and manifest in all of us, both humanity and the rest of the natural order. It can be argued that it is this understanding of Modimo that translators such as Moffat and others, including theologians of the colonial Christianity, failed to grasp when they translated the gendered God of Christianity as Modimo wa Batswana in the Setswana Bible and theological discourse. As Setiloane argued in his book (1976), the Batswana image of Modimo hardly fits with the biblical pattern of God. The question is why did they translate Modimo in this manner? It also still brings us to the question of whose interests it was in, and what power this gave to the translator. It is for this reason that Setiloane proposed that we will better represent Modimo with the pronoun “IT” than “He”.

⁴⁵ Gomang Seratwa. Ntloedibe-Kuswani, *Translating the Divine: The case of Modimo in the Setswana Bible*, in *Other Ways of reading African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W Dube. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature), 2001:83

The gendered God in the Setswana Bible and the captivity of Modimo: ...

Such a proposal by Setiloane will lead towards the unshackling of Modimo from the Setswana Bible, as well as challenging the concepts such as *Rara or Raetsho* (Father or Our Father), that is expressed in masculine terms and bring about a true concept and meaning of Modimo. It is without doubt that the 1992 Setswana Bible, which is a reversion of Wookey's Bible, carried out by Morolong of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa in Botswana, made a few changes such as Matthew 10:8 and other cases where Badimo were translated as "demons" – words such as *mewa e maswe* are now used. Even though Modimo retains gendered male features, this attempt by Morolong⁴⁴ was to decolonise Wookey's translation; unfortunately it did not depatriarchalise it.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to argue that the arrival of the missionaries brought about colonialism and Christianity. It is in the writings of the missionaries that one can ascertain the perceptions and attitudes towards the natives of South Africa. Journals of travellers such as Burchell, Sparrman, Barrow, among others, presents the other side of the story, though not objective as one would expect it to be. Furthermore, it is evident that the evangelisation of people served a certain interest. This was to "transform", "civilise" and "educate" them. I have also argued that one has to make a distinction between the concept of Modimo according to the missionaries and the Setswana concept of Modimo. The translation of the Bible into Setswana brought about serious consequences in the understanding of Modimo. The result was the shackling of Modimo and the gendering of Modimo based on the translation theory that sees indigenous language and traditions as *preparatio evangelica*. Based on the premise that the Bible is a source text and the language and traditions of indigenous people is "receptor languages", the result of this process was the textual burial of the Setswana tradition (Badimo) and the chaining and gendering of Modimo. It is the challenge of black church historians, biblical scholars and theologians to excavate and bring to the fore the gender neutrality of Modimo in order to address the negative legacy of Christianity. In other words, it is crucial now that the studies of the history of Christianity and the translation of the Bible be done

⁴⁴ It is interesting to note that Morolong is the indigenous male translator, as a result brought into the translation his gender. Thus it is imperative for African (Batswana) women to be involved in the translation process. Failure to do so; the colonial gendering of their deities is likely to be continued by indigenous male translators. As the power of the written word can suppress oral tradition and make the biblical texts to be more authentic than oral tradition (cf. Ntloedibe-Kuswani, Gomang. Seratwa. *Translating the Divine: The case of Modimo in the Setswana Bible*, in *Other Ways of reading African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W Dube. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature), 2001.

independent of the evangelisation process.⁴⁵ Here, I refer to what the recipients of the gospel are saying by reading behind the text written by the missionary to project a certain propaganda.

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⁴⁵ This view is also reflected on by Dora R. Mbuwayesango, How local Divine powers were suppressed: A case of Mwari of the Shona, in *Other Ways of reading African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W Dube. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature), 2001.

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